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SUBJECT: Niger: Child Labor in Gold Mining Operations

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¶1. SUMMARY: On June 25, Embassy officials visited three artisanal gold mines in Tillabery region, 100 km outside of Niamey. The visit, organized by the ILO's International Program for the Elimination of Child Labor (ILO/IPEC), evaluated gold mining sites in Niger that are notorious for exploiting some of the worst forms of child labor. The Government of Niger (GON) and several NGOs have made noticeable investments in both infrastructure and social programs to combat the problem of child labor. While the USG has assisted in the construction of schools, increased efforts on the part of all development partners is needed to address effectively the worst forms of child labor in Niger. End summary.

Gold Mining: Primary Means of Survival

¶2. On June 25, Embassy Officials visited three artisanal gold mines northwest of Niamey: Kongo Moussa (75 kilometers), M'Banga (95 kilometers), and Komabangou (175 kilometers). The fact-finding trip allowed two newly-arrived embassy officials on the 3-person fact-finding team to gain a first-hand perspective on gold mine operations and to monitor efforts undertaken by the GON to combat child labor and promote education in the region. Embassy officers were accompanied by members of the ILO's International Program for the Elimination of Child Labor (ILO/IPEC) team. To date, the ILO has concerted much of its energy to combat the problem of child labor through sensitization programs and promoting primary school education. Embassy officials visited sites where ILO/IPEC works in conjunction with local communities to rescue children from mine work and enroll them into school. Like some other communities in Niger, mining operations are the means of survival. When asked about profit from gold mining activities, many responded, "it depends, we don't really know how much we make." Oftentimes, parents force their children to work, instead of sending them to school.

State of Gold Mining Sites

¶3. All of the mining sites that Embassy officials visited are located in the region of Tillabery, regarded as one the poorest regions in Niger. To reach these mines, one must travel in some cases hundreds of kilometers across the savanna and along dirt roads, stopping occasionally to cross river beds before arriving at a given site. Embassy officials noticed that the majority of workers live in temporary housing several hundreds of feet away from the mines where they often work 10-hour days. The communities of the three sites visited - Kongo Moussa, M'Banga, and Komabangou - appeared to be sparsely developed. The discovery of new sites has motivated some workers to relocate and others have left to work on farms due to the start of the rainy season. For the latter, they

will not return to mining until the end of the rainy season in late September. Even though continuing mining operations during the rainy season is extremely hazardous, many workers have continued the work, hoping to capitalize in some way.

Plenty of Risk, Little Reward

¶4. Gold mining and artisanal operations at the various sites are similar in nature. Unlike industrialized mining sites, operations at these sites are simple, yet time consuming and very dangerous. Lack of electricity and motorized machinery requires all mining operations to be completed manually. These vertical shafts are excavated using picks and shovels. The extracted material is then removed with buckets and plastic sacks. Digging in these shafts is one of the most physically demanding jobs that embassy officials witnessed. Workers often dig for two hours non-stop before returning to ground level. Furthermore, the risk of falling blocks or the collapse of the shaft itself is high. The shafts are usually reinforced by bamboo and/or wood. Moreover, there is no ventilation system, which increases the risk of suffocation for workers. The maximum depth allowed by the authorities for the open-pit method is 10 meters. However, many sites contained shafts with depths well over 10 meters, usually 1.5-2 meters in width. While there was no way to obtain an exact measurement of the shafts' depth, Embassy officials suspect some shafts may have extended as deep as 30 meters.

Gold Mining Takes a Physical Toll on Workers

¶5. The process of acquiring gold usually requires several operations, usually involving crushing, grinding and sifting dirt

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and rock before the gold can be panned. Gold mining is not discriminatory in nature: men, women and children all work side-by-side in this arduous operation. Quartz blocks are placed into a large hollow stone and smashed using a heavy metal pestle to produce pieces that are 2-3 centimeters in diameter pieces for subsequent grounding into smaller pieces. This powder is then shifted to separate the fine particles from the large pieces. When asked how long they performed this process, most responded that they remained in a sedentary position for hours on end. At these particular sites, gold is concentrated by panning or vanning. Panning is the process of washing the ore manually, while vanning is performed by using pans or plates to sift for the gold.

Performance Determines Salary

¶6. Salary is not fixed; it is determined by the amount of gold that workers find. When Embassy officials pressed workers for numbers, they were told that workers often earn 1/4 or less of the selling price for the quantity of gold that they find. For example, if 1 gram of gold sells for around 12 thousand CFA francs (approximately 25 US Dollars) in Niamey, then the maximum the workers would receive is three thousand CFA francs (approximately 6.50 US Dollars). However, this sum is then split among the entire team of workers who contributed in the gold processing. The uncertainties of receiving pay is common, and most workers admit that they can earn anywhere from nothing to 1 million CFA francs (approximately 2150 US Dollars) per month. (Note: Current exchange rate: 1 USD = 465 FCFA. End note.)

Evidence of Child Labor

¶7. Child labor was evident at all sites. According to government officials, children under the age of 18 are prohibited from digging in the shafts. In addition, they are discouraged from crushing, grinding and participating in any other form of arduous labor.

Embassy officials, however, noticed children performing such tasks at all sites. Children were seen walking around the shafts areas covered in dirt, an indication that they were indeed descending into these deep shafts that were in some cases as deep as 30 meters. Embassy officials asked the children their age, and the general response was 12-15 (Note: Children looked no older than 10, though stunted growth is prevalent in Niger. End note.) At the Komabangou site, there were reports of prostitution among girls as young as 12 years old.

¶18. Several thousand children are estimated to work at the various sites: Kongo Moussa has an estimated 2,000 employed children; M'Banga has an estimated 5,000 employed children; and Komabangou village figures seem much higher, but officials were unable to give an accurate number. ILO officials noted that the government was conducting a survey on children's situation in most of the villages, with results expected in the coming weeks.

Efforts Made to Protect Children

¶19. The GON, in partnership with the International Labor Organization (ILO) and World Vision, has made substantial efforts to promote education in these mining regions, notorious for employing children. Kongo Moussa, M'Banga, and Komabangou are examples of sites where efforts made by the GON have enabled children to attend school and enroll in various literacy programs. In many cases, NGOs such as World Vision finance and oversee the construction of schools, and the GON is responsible for providing teachers.

More Resources Needed

¶10. Village council members and parents requested more assistance. In particular, they mentioned the need for a "school canteen," i.e., a food and accommodation program for children who live very far from the schools and those without a home. They also requested the construction of more classrooms and wells for clean drinking water. Parents at the M'Banga site stated that there used to be 604 enrolled students; however because students at times needed to walk 15 kilometers to return home from school, many stopped coming to class. Most administrators believe that with the addition of a canteen, students would once again attend school, because they would no longer have to walk several kilometers to get something to eat.

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Health Risks Not Taken Lightly

¶11. Parents and administrators alike acknowledged the inherent dangers that come with working in such dire conditions. Many emphasized the need for a medical clinic. Embassy officials noted that there are very few medical facilities in the area, and many lack sufficient medical supplies and personnel to treat such a variety of illnesses and conditions. Furthermore, access to the villages surrounding these sites is difficult, usually via dirt roads that can take hours to reach.

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